

# Publishing Books

WISE COMMENTATORS have long evaluated books and bookmaking. “Man builds no structure which outlives a book,” wrote Eugene Fitch Ware in *The Book*, and Justin M’Carthy’s *A Ballade of Book-Making* declared, “The critics challenge and defend...of making books there is no end.” Others have written loving odes to the book. Garrison Keillor, for instance: The book is a “great and ancient invention,” he marveled, “slow to hatch, as durable as a turtle, light and shapely as befits a descendant of the tree.... A handsome, useful object begotten by the passion for truth... [books] contain our common life and keep it against the miserable days when meanness operates with a free hand, and save it for the day when the lonesome reader opens the cover and the word is resurrected.”

Again and again seen as threatened by competitors more modern, with dire prognostications of a society unable or disinclined to read, the book—“the higher end of culture”—even in this technological age just won’t go away. Warnings of the death of the book and the degradation of literature have been prevalent for decades, yet books survive and book publishing remains a viable and important force with the media mix. At times, it is hard to distinguish the publishing of books from the rest of the media enterprise, since publishing houses are both independent entities and also part of newspaper, magazine and electronic media empires. The oldest of the mass media, books also were the first to achieve a global presence, crossing easily over national and political boundaries from earliest times and serving as a venue for debate and development of thought. As testimony to their continued viability, publishing houses are briskly bought up in the international marketplace by global media conglomerates.

Books have long been the stuff of which other media content is derived. Serialized in newspapers and magazines, they become screenplays and teleplays and are published in electronic form or make news in their own right. They entertain and inform and make a play for our affections on the open market, and also enjoy the greatest closed shop of all: schools from K through postdoctoral levels, all of which rely on books for intellectual and professional nourishment.

Compared with other players in the modern media marketplace, books make a modest economic impact. But their importance and continued influence on society and culture in this country and elsewhere intrigues and intoxicates even the most seasoned critic. Books, and by extension book publishing, are prestigious, with "writing a book" still one of the most desirable and honored goals of many individuals, even those unlikely to write much of anything. Books, we know, range from literary classics to sleazy kiss-and-tell exposés. People talk glibly of books without full consideration of the massive range that the medium entails, from trade books to texts to reference works, children's literature and other genres published every year.

Books (and their publishers) are always being threatened with extinction. Canadian media guru Marshall McLuhan, known mainly through his books, predicted "the death of print," the electronic media being the most likely successor. The book and its makers had heard that forecast before, however, with the advent of mass-circulation newspapers, market-segmented magazines, radio, television, the computer and other new technologies. Still, the book endures, in part because of its portability and its permanence, in part because of its heritage as a conveyor of thought and ideas. No other medium can do what books do either as a media product or as a social influence as disseminator of ideas and information. Of late, books and book publishing have come under fire not only as a doomed medium, but as a once-great institution fallen to schlock and profit mongering. Publishing houses have turned into houses of ill repute, the critics sniff, charging that bottom-line, market-oriented decision making has resulted in such a lowering of quality that book publishers, if not doomed by illiteracy or competition, should be nonetheless put out of their low-brow misery. Mammon has consumed and con-

quered the muses of literature, they say, ensuring the decline of the book into inconsequence.

The purpose of this issue of the *Media Studies Journal* is to examine and explore the current health and future prospects of books and the book publishing industry in America. Because of the global economy and multinational conglomerates, much of what is said here applies elsewhere as well, but the book publishing industry in this country has its own unique character and condition to be worth a detailed look and analysis. "The tidiness of the book disguises the chaos of publishing," opines sociologist and publisher Irving Louis Horowitz elsewhere in these pages, a statement that is itself a teaser for all of us who know something and want to know more about authors and agents, editors and publishing specialists, book publishers themselves and the booksellers who stock the wares. For those who look beyond the cover of the book and wonder about the process that places books in our hands, there is the story of modern ownership patterns and what they portend for future content of books.

While book reviews and literary quarterlies preen themselves as following the best of book publishing's offerings, they are enterprises where few of the players know the whole story. Again, the "tidiness of the book" is deceptive. While most of the publishing industry is physically located within a few miles of where this journal is published in the city of New York, there is also a growing presence of book publishers, large and small, in other locations, thanks in part to electronic publishing and the vitality of academic presses on both metropolitan and rural campuses. The industry and its products demonstrate great breadth, ranging from virtual cottage-industry publishers to those that are parts of large conglomerates. And while most of the 50,000 or so books published each year cannot boast particularly high profiles, the best sellers, the stars, are internationally famous. The so-called "respectable" side of book publishing, whether trade or text, is part of the nation's literary culture and heritage. But so is the less respectable side, the brazen romance novels and pulp fiction found on supermarket shelves, and even the "subversive filth" hidden behind the counter in adult bookstores. All are wares in the marketplace of ideas.

Book publishing in America conjures up many images: small, upright family firms dedicated to the cream of literature; legendary, larger-than-life editors at venerable publishing houses who shape a nation's literary tastes; underpaid young college graduates—mostly women—mainstays of book publishing, winnowing through stacks of unsolicited manuscripts; famous authors and megabuck advances; the publisher's lunch; ideas surfacing first in books before exploding onto the public stage. Some of these images contain the glint of truth; others are pure fantasy.

Books, more than any other immediate and throwaway media, depend on other social institutions. Without schools and education, book publishing would not be much; without books, what would mass education be? Government, both by legislation and action, also is linked inexorably to the book. Indeed, the federal Government Printing Office in Washington, D.C., is the nation's largest publisher. Books come from and inform nonprofit foundations, colleges and universities, churches and religious organizations, the arts and many other social institutions integral to our culture and life.

**B**ECAUSE BOOKS and book publishing can be approached from so many different angles by so many different players and interests, we have tried in this issue to draw some of the most knowledgeable people in the field into the conversation. Without pretending to offer an exhaustive view of books and publishing, this volume contains perspectives ranging from the insider view of the distinguished publishing executive to those of the young editor, the agent, the author and the bookseller, as well as the reader.

Providing the broadbrush overview of the structure and economic history of book publishing is Dan Lacy, former senior vice president of McGraw-Hill, who leads a section on "The Business" by refuting the doomsayers' view of the book as dodo, a victim of technological progress. In his introductory essay, "From Family Enterprise to Global Conglomerate," Lacy links the book's fortunes to the Baby Boom, rising education and literacy levels and economic profitability. Joining Lacy with a melancholy forward look at how books will react to new technology is former Macmillan President

Jeremiah Kaplan. In "For Books, Another Brave New World," Kaplan predicts that books as we know them will disappear in the next century, although writers and readers will not.

The *Journal's* second section, "The Players," offers voices and viewpoints from many in the book publishing game—editors, agents, publishers, writers, reviewers and booksellers. Leading off is "Twelve Visions," a symposium of brief assessments on the state and prospects of the industry by 12 players, industry figures including McGraw-Hill Chairman and CEO Joseph L. Dionne, sociologist and publisher Irving Louis Horowitz, author Alfred Kazin, essayist Eliot Weinberger, university press director Elizabeth C. Hadas, book historian John Tebbel and Princeton University writing professor Walter Litz.

Another player, Jonathan Karp, a young Random House editor, writes in "Decline? What Decline?" that rumors of the industry's death have been exaggerated. Indeed, he contends, there is no shortage of quality books being written today, although he acknowledges that the industry's focus is increasingly commercial, and "the trash is getting trashier." Following Karp is the publisher's perspective. John P. McMeel, president of Universal Press Syndicate and chairman of Andrews and McMeel Publishing, describes life after New York City in "A Voice from the Heartland—Alive and Well, Thank You." From his vantage point in Kansas City, McMeel describes a landscape in which being out of the Manhattan publishing mainstream is more benefit than bane.

We then turn to questions of agents and the selling of literature. In "Literary Power Brokers Come of Age," librarian, author and industry scholar Thomas L. Bonn traces the hundred-year history of literary agenting in the United States, and shows how agents have become central to the publishing business. Offering a contrasting view is Judith Appelbaum, director of a New York City writer-consulting firm, who argues in "Traveling the Rocky Road to Readers" that agents are far from a requirement for authors trying to break into print. The process need not be so arduous, she argues, while demystifying the steps from manuscript to publication.

One worsening threat to books and publishing is the incidence of censorship, contends our next essay author, Gene D. Lanier, librari-

an at East Carolina University and former president of the North Carolina Library Association. In "Censorship—The Enemy Is Us," Lanier says threats from the religious right and other self-appointed morality police have had an increasingly chilling effect, as librarians and publishers second-guess—and censor—themselves.

At the opposite end of the continuum from the lonely scribe is the eager reader, guided in book selections by book reviews and bookstores. In "The Cultural Ecology of Book Reviews," Gerald Howard, a trade-book editor for W.W. Norton, assesses the importance of book reviews in helping guide and shape our culture. From the all-powerful *New York Times Book Review* to less omnipotent publications, Howard argues that book reviews serve an essential function not only for authors and editors, but in terms of holding at bay the rise of what he calls Postbrow culture. Rounding out "The Players" is New York City author Norman MacAfee, who performs a labor of love in "A Walking Tour of Manhattan's Independent Bookstores." From the Gotham Book Mart to the Strand ("eight miles of books") to Shakespeare & Co., MacAfee guides us through the shelves and the histories of more than two dozen of New York's greatest bookstores, which for lovers of books share character and characteristics of booksellers everywhere.

In the *Journal's* third and final section, "The Impact," we offer four essays on the end products themselves: books and their readers. Leading the section is Carlin Romano, literary critic for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, with "Extra! Extra! The Sad Story of Books as News." Why are there so few book lovers among journalists? he muses. There are many excuses—none good—for why the press ignores their competing relative, the book. Media researcher and press critic Philip Meyer of the University of North Carolina picks up the theme in "Accountability When Books Make News," noting the similarities between newspapers and books. Books have in some ways become news agenda setters in the modern era, Meyer argues, publishing topics that newspapers fear to address in the libel-rich climate of the 1990s.

From a reader's perspective, writes John Maxwell Hamilton, director of the Manship School of Mass Communication at

Louisiana State University and late of the World Bank, the literary landscape is just as bleak as current political prospects when examined through the writings of U.S. presidents. In "Why Can't Mr. President Write?" Hamilton casts a vote of no-confidence against most presidential memoirs. Because there is no time for presidents to sit and think, most presidential writing is dense, obscure and self-serving. As a measure of the health of the political system, Hamilton concludes, presidential writings are an unsettling symptom.

Concluding this section is Gordon and Patricia Sabine's essay on the importance of books in people's lives. In "Books Make the Difference," the husband-wife team of former journalism educators describes some of the responses of Americans—from Walter Matthau to a guy in an Oregon bar—to questions about books that changed their lives and why.

Finally, in this volume's book review, scholar Beth Luey, editor of *Publishing Research Quarterly*, gives us the "book" on books. In "Mammon and the Muses," Luey examines six works about book publishing that evaluate the conflicts in the industry between culture and commerce. Publishing houses may not be houses of ill repute, she concludes, but love of lucre has taken at least some of the luster off the world of literature.

THE EDITORS